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AUTHOR	O'Harra, Deborah
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ABSTRACT

Parents know their children better than any outside expert and can use that knowledge to advocate for their children. This handbook is designed to assist parents in Alaska in advocating for their children, with the eventual goal of helping children identify situations that need advocacy and to take responsibility for advocating for themselves. Section 1, "Rights and Responsibilities," delineates parents' rights and responsibilities regarding their children's education. Section 2, "20 Questions: Common Concerns among Parents," presents answers to specific questions ranging from whether parents can request a specific teacher to how much to tell their child's teacher about their family life. In Section 3, "When Our Children Are in Trouble," parents and professionals discuss how to handle clashes between school authorities and students and how to advocate when the child is clearly breaking a rule. Section 4, "When Our Children Have Special Needs," provides an overview of federal and Alaska state law, and advice from parents who are veterans of special education advocacy. Section 5, "When Cultures Collide," discusses how to advocate for children from Alaska Native, American Indian, African American, and Hispanic families. Section 6, "Effective Communication," offers tips on how to navigate the system of public education and presents the "Ladder of Participation," a communications model. Section 7, "Resource Guide," lists statewide agencies and organizations and hotline numbers for parents and children. (KDFB)

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THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN IN ALASKA'S SCHOOLS

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THE ALASKA WOMEN'S COMMISSION

JUNE 1991

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The Parents' Guide to Advocating for Children in Alaska's Schools

Written by
Deborah O'Harra

Edited by
Carol Sturgulewski

Layout by
Cathy Gleason

Cover Illustration by
Vicki Wilkinson

Project Manager for the Commission
Glenne Ralls

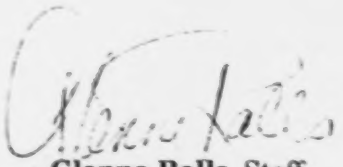
Alaska Women's Commission
3601 C Street, Suite 742
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

THE STARTING GATE

Introducing yourself in the school your child attends is the best start for advocating for your children. Letting teachers and the principal know who you are and your willingness to help in areas they need help will go a long way. Advocating should not begin when problems arise.

Parents and teachers agree the best education comes when there is cooperation between the two.

Schools are always looking for library aids, P.T.A. officers, teacher aids, room mothers, etc. It is not hard to find a way to get involved. Just ask a teacher or school staff. Teachers respect and give ear to those parents who are willing to be a positive influence in their school.



Glenne Ralls, Staff
Alaska Women's Commission

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INTRODUCTION

When we see our children off for the first day of school, we may feel we are "losing" them to the larger world. But this important rite of passage doesn't mean we're no longer our child's first teachers and counselors. Sometimes we think professional educators are the experts who will tell us what's good for our children. However, to maximize our children's learning opportunities and enjoyment of school, we must remember that we are the experts—we know our children better than any outside expert, no matter how qualified, can hope to know them. And we must learn how to use that knowledge in advocating for our children.

School professionals see our children with their "public faces" on. We see the whole child, the one who hates doing homework but brings home straight A's, or the child who's troubled at school but secure at home. We watch our children interact in the larger world beyond our front door and we make decisions that will help them adjust, learn and risk. Because public education comprises such a large extent of the "outside world" for our children, we must develop the skills to help them negotiate that world.

Advocating for Children

Advocating for children can be viewed as a set of techniques that help our children identify strengths and problems, recognize their role in a situation, make choices and solve problems. Some basic steps can be used in helping children identify situations that need advocacy and, eventually, guiding children to take responsibility for advocating for themselves.

First, the problem or issue must be identified. Some young children are able to verbalize discomfort or unhappiness. However, many are not; parents, then, pick up cues from behavior changes, distress at going to school or casual comments.

Once the problem or issue is identified, it should be discussed between the child and parents. If a child is unable to keep up with homework, for example, the child and parents should brainstorm a little, looking for solutions that would help the child. Is she using classtime productively? Does she have a quiet environment and a set schedule for homework at home?

Once we have identified our child's needs, we should discuss the issue with school personnel and attempt to work out a comfortable solution. In approaching school personnel, we must realize that they may see "problems" in a different light; their "solutions" will likely be geared to making their own situations more comfortable.

For example, a child who's having trouble interacting with his peers appropriately may be a headache to his overworked teacher. Her solution may be to put him in another class. If we realize that the child is in a transitional time because of family illness, death or divorce, we can propose a solution less drastic than the teacher's, but one that will accommodate our child and his needs.

The younger our children are, the more we must advocate for their best interests. As they grow older and watch us advocate, they will learn the skills to do it for themselves. We must be able to guide them gently and let go, let them do it for themselves. Sometimes newspapers carry stories of high school students who present their views at school board or city council meetings. These students have learned the skills of advocacy, many of them perhaps from watching their parents interact on their behalf.

What's in the Handbook

This handbook is intended to help parents who have specific questions (see **20 QUESTIONS: COMMON CONCERNS AMONG ALASKA PARENTS**, page 7) and to provide general information on advocating for children in the schools. From helping with homework to suspected child abuse, this section addresses common questions from parents of school-aged children. It includes perspectives from urban and Bush parents and professionals.

Advocacy is especially important for certain children. In the section **WHEN OUR CHILDREN ARE IN TROUBLE**, parents and professionals discuss how to handle clashes between school authorities and students and how to advocate when the child is clearly breaking a rule.

Perhaps the most seasoned advocates are the parents whose children are physically disabled, emotionally disturbed or learning-impaired. In the section **WHEN OUR CHILDREN HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS**, an overview of federal and state law is

discussed, along with advice from parents who are veterans of special-ed advocacy.

When Alaska Native, American Indian, African American and Hispanic children enter a system that is not responsive to their needs, school can become stressful and unfulfilling. Parents and professionals discuss how to advocate for these students in **When Cultures Collide.**

No matter what the issue or who the child, experienced advocates advise us to keep certain things in mind: Our presence and involvement in our children's schools means a better education for them. We should familiarize ourselves with the school district's handbook and with state and federal laws that apply to the education of our children. And, most important, if we don't advocate for our children, no one else is likely to.

In the **Effective Communication** section of this book, parents and professionals offer tips on how to navigate the system of public education. Helpful to some parents is the "Ladder of Participation," a communications model.

Finally, the **Resource Guide** offers statewide agencies and organizations and hotline numbers for parents and children.

Our Rights and Responsibilities

Parents have certain rights and responsibilities regarding the education of our children. Each school district has a rights and responsibilities handbook, as mandated by the State Board of Education. Here are general rights and responsibilities.

Rights:

❑ We have the right to see our children's **school records**. Records are confidential and may only be seen by professionals on a "need-to-know" basis.

❑ We have the right to have a **person** of our choice **accompany us to meetings** with school personnel.

❑ Our children have the right to an education **free of corporal punishment** in public schools. If we choose a private school that employs corporal punishment, we must first sign a consent form before school personnel can physically discipline our children.

❑ If our children are placed in the **custody of the state** Department of Health and Social Services because of abuse or neglect, we have the right to be notified within 12 hours; the state must schedule a hearing within 48 hours of notification.

❑ **Free or reduced lunch** (and sometimes breakfast) meals are available to elementary and junior high school children whose parents are in financial need. Check with the school for the appropriate form.

❑ When our children are **not speakers of English**, we have the right to ask for appropriate instruction (see **When Cultures Collide**, page 17).

❑ If our children are **physically or mentally impaired**, we have a right to seek a free and appropriate public education for them (see **When Our Children Have Special Needs**, page 12).

Responsibilities:

❑ We have the responsibility to **provide our children with an education** from the ages of 7 to 16. The type of education—public school, private school, correspondence, or state-approved home-schooling—is up to us.

❑ We must **provide support**—food, care, clothing, shelter, medical attention and education—until our children are 18. Parents who are able to provide support and fail to do so can be prosecuted.

❑ As parents, we have the responsibility to **report suspected child abuse** to the Division of Family and Youth Services. Their toll-free number is: (800) 478-4444.

❑ When our children stay at home ill, we should **report the absence** to the school in the morning.

❑ If our children must take **medicine at school**, we should give written permission to school personnel. For long-term prescriptions (more than two weeks), also submit a doctor's request.

❑ When moving, we should notify the school in writing three to four days before **leaving the school or district**.

20 Questions: Common Concerns Among Parents

1. **Do I have to send my children to public school?**
No. Alternatives to public school are private education, state-approved home-schooling or correspondence courses. You can contact your local home-school network for more information on correspondence courses. (See Our Rights and Responsibilities, page 6.)

2. **Can I send my child to a school out of my area?**
Yes. Check with your district to see if you need an attendance zone exception.

3. **Can I request a specific teacher for my child?**
Yes. Many parents recommend this. Anchorage's Northwood Elementary principal Susan Usher encourages parents to request specific teachers, although not all requests can be honored in a given school year.

4. **Can my child's teacher spank her?**
Not if she attends public school. Some private schools use corporal punishment, but in Alaska, children have public education free of corporal punishment. (See Our Rights and Responsibilities, page 6.)

5. **Does my child have to conform to a dress code?**
Contact your child's school district to see if there is a dress code. Different districts have different rules for appropriate attire.

6. **What should I do if I can't meet my child's nutritional needs?**
An important part of success in school relies on good eating and sleeping habits. Check with your school to see if there are breakfast and lunch programs offered free or at a reduced cost. (See Our Rights and Responsibilities, page 6.)

7. **What if I think my child is gifted?**
You may contact your child's school and request testing. If in fact your child is gifted, your school district has a legal obligation to provide an appropriate education for her. (See When Our Children Have Special Needs, page 12.)

8. **What if I suspect my child has learning disabilities?**
Contact your local school district and request an evaluation. You don't have to know what the problem is, or even be certain there is a problem (see When Our Children Have Special Needs, page 12).

9. **Must my disabled child be isolated from children who are not disabled?**
No. Federal law provides for "least restrictive environment" in educating disabled children. That means your child should spend the maximum amount of time possible in a regular classroom or program (see When Our Children Have Special Needs, page 12).

10. **If my child and his teacher have a personality clash, what should I do?**
Contact the school principal and explain the situation. Sometimes a child and a teacher don't "fit." Follow your instincts. If the principal does not want to place your child in another class, you have the right to demand that he or she do so.

11. **Who do I talk to if I suspect a teacher is physically or sexually abusing my child?**
First contact the Division of Family and Youth Services. Follow all procedures. Then notify the appropriate law enforcement agency and talk to the local shelter or advocate program. Make it clear to school personnel that you believe in your child and are taking steps to ensure his well-being.

12. What if I believe my child is being emotionally abused?

Emotional abuse is defined under Alaska law as "mental injury," an injury to the emotional well-being, or intellectual or psychological capacity of a child, as evidenced by an observable and substantial impairment in the child's ability to function in a developmentally appropriate manner.

If you think a teacher is emotionally abusing your child, document each incident and contact the appropriate person at school--the counselor, principal or vice-principal. Set up a meeting with this person, the teacher, and your child. You may demand that your child be placed in a different classroom.

13. How much help should I give my child with her homework?

The first step in helping a child with homework is providing a quiet, uncluttered place for her study. If she's having trouble, make sure she understands the assignment. Then encourage her to try it on her own and come to you when she's finished so you can go over the assignment together. Don't do the homework for her. If her homework difficulties persist, better schedule a meeting with her teacher.

14. Is it legal for school personnel to search my child or her locker?

School personnel must have "probable cause" to believe that they will find something illegal or dangerous. If they do find something that violates the law, it may be given to the police for use in a criminal trial. In some districts, students may refuse to be searched, or request a parent or guardian be present during the search, but school personnel may call police to conduct the search. Check with your child's district for her school's policies and procedures.

15. My child's teacher assigns personal writing and I don't feel comfortable with it. What can I do?

You can talk to your child's teacher and explain your feelings. Ask if there are alternative assignments your child can do. If the teacher is uncooperative, see the principal.

16. My child doesn't speak English. How will he learn?

Federal law requires school districts to give appropriate educations to children who speak languages other than English. In some cases, a child will be instructed in his native language. In other cases, individualized tutoring or other bilingual education programs will be offered. Contact your child's school district to find out what bilingual programs are offered. (Also, see WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE, page 17.)

17. What should I do if I think my child is involved with other students who are abusing drugs or alcohol?

You can talk to the school nurse and/or your child's counselor. If you establish that your child is abusing drugs or alcohol, you may want to seek private treatment. If you choose to seek help from the school system, you may want your child classified as handicapped, based on drug/alcohol abuse. The school district has an obligation (under Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973) to provide treatment and services for handicapped children. Children classified as handicapped for this reason cannot be kicked out of school for substance abuse. (See WHEN OUR CHILDREN ARE IN TROUBLE, page 10 and WHEN OUR CHILDREN HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS, page 12.)

18. How much should I tell my child's teacher about our family life?

Your child's teacher needs to know any circumstance that might affect your child's learning process and/or emotional resources. For example, a death, divorce or separation from a parent or close relative should be reported to the teacher. A serious illness, alcohol or drug abuse, a move, the birth of a sibling are also pertinent. You don't need to go into detail, just apprise the teacher of the situation and ask her to watch for signs of stress in your child and be especially supportive.

19. What's the best way to really know what's going on in my child's school?

Many parents suggest volunteering at your child's school. Participate in a field trip, help out in the classroom, become involved in school committees, or help with the newsletter. In addition, the more involved you become, the more likely your child is to succeed at school.

20. I don't have any experience dealing with teachers and administrators. How can I learn?

An excellent way to learn to advocate is by seeking out experienced parents, those who "know the ropes" and are willing to share their skills and information. Sometimes joining a parents' group or committee will put you in contact with experienced parents. Some school districts have parent resource centers. Call your local school district and ask what kinds of parent programs are available. If you can't find resources in your own community, contact the State Department of Education. (Also refer to the "Ladder of Participation" in the EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION section, page 21).

When Our Children Are in Trouble

Sometimes our children have trouble at school. What should we do? How involved should we get? What are their rights, and what are ours? Rules change from district to district, and even school to school. We should study the school and/or district's handbook and familiarize ourselves with the rules and policies that govern our children's academic lives. Detailed information on required courses, truancy and absenteeism, drugs and alcohol, and free speech and press issues can be found, along with descriptions of special programs that may help our children.

Experience is the best teacher. Here, parents who have successfully advocated when their children had trouble offer the following suggestions.

Suspected Drug and/or Alcohol Abuse:

A student has the right to say no to a Breathalyzer test. The only time they're required by law is when someone is driving.

The school can't detain a student. He or she can get up and leave.

Students have a right to talk to their parents.

Academic Performance:

Parents have recourse. If the teacher says 'Johnny got an F; my gradebook reflects that.' parents can ask what criteria was used in grading.

You need to document. When kids bring paperwork home, file it. Keep their papers.

Parents should remain the child's advocate regardless of whether they finish school or perform well in school.

Parents better starting praising kids. If the kid brings up his grade from an F to a D, praise that kid the way you would if he brought up from a B to an A.

Disciplinary Action:

The first thing is to understand what the child's rights are. Look at the handbook. Immediately go to the school. This lets the school know the problem has to be dealt with.

In cases of suspension, for example, a student has appeal rights. The appeal process goes right up to the school board. If you don't feel comfortable with an action, appeal all the way up.

When parents talk to administrators, take notes and write down the date and time.

Remain calm and do not become abusive. Don't use profanity.

Even if the child is a real discipline problem, reassure him that you're on his side.

In meetings, you need to hear exactly what happened, with the student present.

Parents have every right to see a student's permanent record and ask that derogatory information be removed. Unless it's grades or a psychological evaluation, it doesn't need to be in there.

"Looking Back"

A mother who raised seven children recalls how she navigated the system on behalf of her children.

I had an incident with my oldest daughter when she was in junior high school. She always was a nice girl. Not a girl that would cause problems. I don't remember what, but she did something that the teacher didn't like. It wasn't that serious. But he made her come up to the front of the class. You know how terribly self-conscious kids are at that age. He made her come up to the front and squat up by his desk for ... I don't know if it was a half-hour or an hour. So she came home crying about it and told us. I believe my husband called the principal first. And he wasn't going to do anything about it, so we went to the school board about it.

One time they were doing locker checks. So I had to go out and be there when the narc or whatever opened up my son's locker and there was nothing in his locker to cause any kind of problem. I really never have been a person to believe that my kids cannot do

wrong. Because I have seen them do wrong sometimes.

However, I try to be objective and not always feel that the teacher was necessarily right, either, because sometimes they're not. Usually if I got called on a disciplinary thing the teacher would ask me to talk to the kids about it. I would talk to my husband about it and we together would talk to the child about it and find out what they were going to do to correct the situation.

Usually when I got phone calls it was when the kids were not doing their work ... getting D's or failing. And I'm grateful that they do, because how would we know, otherwise? And certainly there are times, especially when you've got a bunch of kids and you're working it's aggravating. Who wants it? I don't like to get a call from the school.

I believe in having faith in my children. And there are times when I have been wrong. But I'll tell you what, I would rather have faith and be wrong than to be a parent that always thinks my kid is wrong.

"Today, I'd Handle it Differently"

A parent's perspective on the needs of her gifted child and how things could have turned out.

My son was in the gifted program in the Anchorage public school system several years ago. His standardized test scores (consistently 98-99%) clearly indicated his above-average intelligence. He refused to do the homework since he could make A's on the tests without doing any outside work.

Because he refused to do the homework but had high test scores, he maintained a C average. I strongly urged them to let him stay in the program and give him F's if need be, so he could experience the consequences of his behavior.

But they made him leave the gifted program and put him back into a regular classroom. He continued to do no homework and still made A's on the tests. He lost all respect for the educational process. He's been bored and angry throughout his junior high school and high school years. Somehow, I have a hard time respecting the "system," too.

I am very sad, six years later, that I did not stomp my foot clear to the school board, if necessary, to make the school more responsive to his needs.

When Our Children Have Special Needs

Some children need special education because of physical, mental or emotional factors. Children who are disabled, mentally ill or impaired are entitled to certain types of education.

Who is Entitled to Special Education?

All children who have disabilities and are between the ages of 3 and 22. Children entitled to special education are defined in the law according to their disabilities and include those who are **mentally retarded, hearing impaired, speech impaired, visually impaired, orthopedically impaired, learning disabled** and **emotionally disturbed.**

In addition, children with **cerebral palsy, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, cancer, diabetes** and **heart disease** are entitled to special education if needed.

A **learning disability** is any disorder which affects a child's understanding or use of spoken or written language. This includes conditions such as brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia or developmental aphasia.

Emotionally disturbed children are those who express inappropriate behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances, are generally depressed or unhappy, are unable to build or maintain personal relationships, or who are unable to learn
because of factors other than health, intellect or sensory development.

Even if we are uncertain about whether a problem exists, or what the problem might be, we can make a referral to the school district and an evaluation will be scheduled.

Public Law 101-476

Under **Public Law 101-476** the federal **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, all disabled children are provided a free and appropriate public education. Some provisions of this act include:

Notice—Parents must receive written notices before our children are evaluated or placed in a special program.

Consent—Parents must consent to pre-placement evaluations and initial placement of our children in a specialized program.

Evaluation—Parents have a right to a full evaluation of our children's individual educational needs, including independent evaluation at the school district's expense.

Records—Parents have a right to know what records are kept of our children, and to see those records.

Confidentiality of Information—Only school professionals with legitimate educational interests may see a child's school records without parents' written permission.

Least Restrictive Environment—Parents have a right to have our children educated with non-disabled children to the maximum extent possible.

Hearings—If parents do not agree with educational decisions regarding our children, we have the right to request a hearing.

Additional Rights

Among the principles of Public Law 101-476 are:

Principle of Non-discriminatory testing, which ensures testing by a multi-disciplinary team in a child's native language or mode of communication. No single test can be used as a sole criterion for placement.

Principle of Individual Education Programs (IEP) guarantees the child's right to a written statement or plan for education (see IEP below).

Individual Educational Program (IEP)

The Individual Educational Program (IEP) is a written document which outlines the goals and services for our children's educational program for a specific period of time, usually one year. Included in the IEP are the following components:

Present level of performance—What a child can do at the present time. Example: Susan can count to 10 from memory.

Annual goal—A statement describing a skill or task that a child should be able to do by the end of a year. Example: Susan will be able to count to 100 from memory.

Short-term objective—A statement that breaks down the annual goal into workable parts. Example: Susan will be able to count to 35 from memory by Christmas.

Related services—Services needed to help a disabled child benefit from special education. These services may include speech pathology, physical therapy, recreation, transportation, counseling, evaluation, parent counseling and training, medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes, health services, social work services or adapted physical education.

Extent of time spent in regular education program—Time spent in a regular classroom. Example: Mary will spend one hour a day in third grade physical education class.

Starting dates, duration of services—Dates on which the child's program and/or services are scheduled to begin and end. Example: Johnny will receive speech therapy beginning September 16, 1992 and continuing until May 31, 1993.

Evaluation criteria, schedules and procedures—Ways to determine if a child has achieved the objectives and goals listed in the IEP. Example: Henry will score 90% correct on teacher-devised weekly arithmetic tests.

Advice from an Advocate

Stacy Gillette helps parents who contact Advocacy Services of Alaska, a non-profit agency that helps protect legal and human rights of developmentally disabled people (see **Resouces**, page 21). She stresses the importance of a good evaluation, which assesses "not just their disability, but how the child learns, what works at home." She says, "The school district has an obligation to perform a good evaluation and then re-evaluate every three years. The parent has the right to an independent evaluation at the district's expense if she or he feels the district's evaluation is inadequate."

Parents of disabled children in rural Alaska may need to advocate more vigorously for their children. "It's expensive to get therapists and other experts out there. Severely handicapped kids tend to get very isolated," Gillette observes. One way parents can help keep their children from unnecessary isolation is to remind the school of its obligation to provide "the least restrictive environment." Parents can insist that their children have regular recess, lunch and storytime privileges, for example.

According to Gillette, parents need to know: their rights, that they're equal partners in the team, that they have the right to disagree, and the right to a hearing (which doesn't necessarily involve attorneys). Advocacy Services of Alaska can help guide parents in securing rights for their children.

Mentally Ill children

Children with diagnosed mental illness (manic depression or schizophrenia, for example) fall under the category of emotionally disturbed in Public Law 101-476. Keeping up with academic work should not be the only criterion used for providing services for emotionally disturbed children. If a child does well academically, but exhibits behavior or emotions that impair his functioning in the school environment, request testing if necessary and an IEP.

Multiple-Needs Children

Sometimes our children have more than one need for special education. They may be gifted and disabled, gifted and mentally ill, or have multiple disabilities. In cases where more than one special education plan is needed, we should meet periodically with all of the teachers involved in our child's education, to discuss how he or she is progressing.

"I Had to Tell My Daughter She Was Handicapped"

"Mommy, Teacher Lynn said I have a brain like Adam Ness. Am I like Adam?" Lisa asked. We were driving home from Lisa's day-care. Adam, a Downs Syndrome child, attended a summer program with Lisa. I thought back to when I had entered the large playroom of the day care center and Lisa, my 10-year-old daughter, was sitting

on a rug playing by herself; the other children gathered around a table playing a group game. She ran to give me a hug and kiss.

Lisa had asked questions before. Why was she in special classes? Why couldn't she read and write like the others in her regular classroom? I had explained to her that some people called her handicapped because she needed special help in learning, and to get that help people have to be labeled. I'm not sure how much she understood, but she seemed satisfied with my answers so I let it go. This time was different. Lisa identified with Adam. Although Lisa never seemed to notice when other children made fun of her, she understood the mean things they said to Adam, and they, in turn, wounded her.

The time had come to have a long talk with my daughter, one that I had known would come, but one that I felt unprepared for.

We discussed her special place in our family, that we all loved everything about her. Then we talked about handicaps, all kinds of them. I told her that everyone has one of some kind. Yes, there would be times when people say and do things that would hurt her, but only because they weren't able to understand her handicap and didn't know her. "Give them a chance to know you, Lisa, and they will learn what we know already. You're a really neat person," I advised.

Looking back four years, we held Lisa back a year so she began kindergarten a month before her sixth birthday. She could sing her ABC's and count to 10, but could not spell her name or tell a square from a circle. At 6, everything was purple to her. But everyone said she would catch up.

When she began school, we assumed that, like her sister, she would blossom. We expected her to learn to write her name, to read, do math and all the things other children do. It didn't happen that way. At the end of the first grading period, the teacher reviewed the tests that all the children had taken and said, "It looks like Lisa will need to be retained this year."

Being only November, I felt it was a little early to decide Lisa needed another year of kindergarten. "I feel if you have already decided that Lisa needs to spend another year here, then we should see that all possible tests are done to determine if there are any problems which are causing her low test scores," I said.

My husband and I weren't particularly concerned about what the psychologist would say about Lisa. The day we went in for her test results was just another appointment. We were sure she would catch up with her peers.

"Your daughter's I.Q. tested at 67; she has a mental age of 3.5," said the doctor. I felt my eyes fill. I knew what a 67 I.Q. meant.

At the pediatrician's recommendation, we took Lisa for a complete evaluation. The developmental pediatrician talked with me honestly. Mildly to moderately mentally retarded children, she explained, learn to read and write, handle a checkbook and hold down a job. Many find employment in the childcare field because their great patience allows them to sit with a toddler for hours and go over and over the ABC's and numbers. They can run a cash register.

Finally someone had told us that Lisa would never catch up. Now our job really began. We wanted Lisa to be happy and confident with herself. We felt her involvement in activities that included all kinds of kids was important to her development. She played T-ball, took ballet and tap and went to gymnastics. We planned to take her to museums, art shows, and community activities to expose her to as many different ideas and creative expressions as possible.

She now shares a resource class with several hearing-impaired children. Their disabilities cause delays in their verbal skills. Verbally, Lisa shines and leads her class. She possesses the patience to sit with classmates and go over and over the same sound or word with them.

We read everything available about children with disabilities. We try to have close

contact with her school, especially her resource teacher.

Lucy Handrahand, family support coordinator for the Alaska Retarded Citizens Association, feels that a family should tell their child just enough to answer her questions, but not give the child overwhelming information.

"Be honest," says Handrahand. "Explain that her manner of learning is different and stress her personal qualities. It is important that she see how she is like other people but doesn't learn in the same way. Parents must be honest with their child. After all, we're not all good at some things, but very good at others."

I wish my daughter were "normal," but if she were, she would be a different person, and I've come to like her. But I want more for her than is available to her in our society now.

It's sad that she never gets invited to class birthday parties or to spend the night with a friend, but perhaps some day attitudes will change. As our children attend school with all kinds of other children, they will learn the tolerance that my generation was never taught.

Two years ago Lisa tried to teach our dog to read. "Read `bear,' Max. Say bear." After a frustrating half-hour, she said to me, "I think Max can read; he just can't talk." That's the way I think of Lisa. There is a lot in her; we just haven't found the way to get it out yet.

—Susan P. Davis

Gifted Children

Alaska school districts have a legal obligation to provide special education for mentally gifted children. How they define gifted, and what percentage of the gifted population they serve, is up to each individual district.

Special education may mean attending a school for highly gifted children (such as Anchorage's Rogers Park Elementary) or participating in an enrichment program.

In enrichment programs, students leave their regular classrooms for a certain number of hours every week and meet with other gifted students in special learning sessions in the arts, humanities, math and science.

Some school districts have pre-school and kindergarten programs for gifted children, in addition to the elementary and secondary enrichment programs.

Often, teachers refer students for testing if they suspect the child is gifted. But sometimes parents request testing. How can you tell if your child should be tested? Experts use various definitions of giftedness.

Characteristics of Gifted Children

Linda Silverman, PhD

Gifted children often have **unique learning styles**; they learn in different ways from other children. They also learn at a **faster pace**. They solve problems rapidly.

They are usually **developmentally advanced**. They learn to talk, walk, read, etc. earlier than usual. They may appear **healthier, physically stronger** and **better-coordinated** than their age-mates.

They are very **curious** and tend to **ask complex questions**. They also give **complicated answers**. Their detailed explanations show greater **depth of understanding** of topics than their classmates'. They are quick to **recognize relationships**, even relationships that others do not see. They **organize information** in new ways, creating **new perspectives**. They often see **many solutions** to a problem.

Their thinking is more **abstract** than their classmates', involving **hypothetical possibilities**, rather than present realities. They often see **ambiguity** in what appears to be "factual" information.

They have **large vocabularies** and tend to express themselves well. They have **unusually good memories**.

They may be **natural leaders**. They may **initiate** and **organize** activities for others. They also enjoy **working independently**. They **easily** become **absorbed** in the mastery of skills.

They may **prefer the company of older children** or **adults**.

They may like to be the **best in everything**, and may **refuse to participate** in activities in which they **might fail**. They are often **perfectionists**, becoming very upset if things don't turn out as they expect. Sometimes they **compare themselves** and their achievements to **great persons they have read about**, rather than to others their own age.

> "As children, the gifted also lead, dare, innovate, dream and solve problems. They sell lemonade, form clubs, make things out of junk, read comic books and Shakespeare, invent games, take apart their bicycles, enter contests, draw pictures, write stories, forge ahead without reading directions, take charge, find loopholes, enjoy puzzles, poker and 'Dungeons and Dragons,' get erratic grades, make fantasy lands out of their bedrooms and avoid adult-dominated activities."
>
> —*Joanne Yatvin, Wisconsin principal, in an article in the New York Times*

Testing and Evaluation

State law requires using multiple criteria when **testing** children for giftedness. No single test score can be used in determining the child's status. A combination of testing may include achievement and abilities tests.

Once a child enters a gifted learning program, she or he must be **re-evaluated** every three years. An **annual review**, which discusses the child's progress in the program, is also required.

Stimulating Our Children's Development

> "Keep them stimulated. Whatever they show an interest in or a special talent in, pursue it—go to libraries and museums."
>
> —*Carol Fitzgerald, mother of gifted fourth-grader at Northwood School in Anchorage*

Gifted children need challenges outside the classroom, as well as in school. Some suggestions come from Betty S. Cherry, editor of The Intellectually Gifted Student: His Nature and His Needs: **don't interrupt** a child deeply involved in a creative activity; **be flexible** with meal and bedtime schedules when the occasion calls for it; **provide working materials** and **space** to be messy; **allow use of kitchen** and **workshop**; **listen** to the child's ideas without criticizing and try to incorporate his ideas in things you do; **ask questions** about what she sees and thinks; **encourage story-telling** and **imagination**; **visit libraries** frequently; have him help **plan trips**; encourage her to **research** subjects which interest her; **provide tape recorders, cameras** and other audio-visual equipment when possible; expose him to **music** and **plays**; give her **music lessons**; do **puzzles**, or **play word games** or **chess** with him.

Often Alaska Native, American Indian, African American, Hispanic and Asian children are not served well by institutions, including schools. We may feel uncertain about what our role as parent or caretaker is, in relation to our child's school.

If we only hear from teachers and administrators when our children are having trouble, we may develop negative views about the school. If we always meet with teachers and school personnel on their "turf," we may feel intimidated. We may feel helpless when our children need guidance through a system we had limited or unsatisfactory experience with when we were children.

Guidelines

* Remember that while educators may have expertise in certain areas, **we are the experts on our children**. We know how they relate to the world, when they're unhappy and what they need to succeed.

* We can ask teachers to **communicate** with us when our children are doing well, not just when they're having trouble. In turn, we can tell them **about positive things** our children have learned or experienced at school.

* We can **invite teachers to meet** with us at home or in a community center, instead of at school.

* **Regular parents' meetings**—also off the school grounds—can be helpful. We can learn from other parents who have experience navigating the system.

Cultural Identity

Rebecca Napoleon, tutor counselor at East High School in Anchorage, and member of the steering committee for the Roger Lang Clearinghouse for Circumpolar Education, stresses cultural identity as a key to successfully educating Alaska Native and American Indian children. She says, "The kids that seem to succeed the most are those who feel very positive about their past history, their culture. They are proud of who they are. They are in power spiritually. You have to be happy for who you are before you can do anything. That is self-esteem."

It is important for us to push for special programs and curriculum that stress cultural identity, especially in rural Alaska. We may volunteer to teach traditional skills or start an oral history project. The more the involved we get, the more responsive the school will be to our children's needs.

Bilingual Education

Federal law requires school districts to provide an appropriate education for children who are not native speakers of English. Students who speak other languages are eligible for special assistance. This assistance comes from bilingual tutors or teachers, or through English-as-a-Second Language programs.

Academic Tracking

Joy Green-Armstrong has served on Anchorage School Board's Minority Education Concerns Committee. She believes parents should be vigilant about "tracking" of students by school counselors. While some students are placed into pre-college curriculum plans, most are tracked into general studies, which may leave the student without proper credits to enter a college or university.

Minority students have a lower graduation rate, partly because they are not guided into courses they need just to earn a high school degree.

All parents should go over graduation requirements in the school's handbook, Green-Armstrong advises.

Indian Education

The Indian Education Act gives federal funding for supplemental programs for Alaska Native and American Indian children, providing school districts meet certain requirements.

The supplemental programs may include tutoring, counseling and cultural enrichment, in a combination of in-school and extra-curricular schedules.

To ensure that the community decides what programs are needed, the Indian Education Act requires that a school district's advisory committee is comprised primarily of parents who are Alaska Native or American Indian.

To learn about programs funded by the Indian Education Act in your child's school, call your school district.

Head Start

In Alaska, when communities of less than 1,000 people have at least 50 percent of households at low-income levels, and no major medical services are available by road, all children in the community are eligible for Head Start programs. Head Start services in "poverty of access" communities include a parent-child program for parents of children from birth to 3 years old, and the regular Head Start preschool program for 3- and 4-year-old children (see RurALCAP, which administers Head Start, in RESOURCES, page 25).

Gender Gaps

All school districts have a representative who handles Chapter 18 concerns, which include equal education opportunities for girls and boys. If we suspect gender bias is interfering with our child's educational opportunities in or out of the classroom, we can contact the Chapter 18 coordinator, talk to the appropriate person at school (counselor, coach, principal) and/or file a formal grievance.

We may also wish to help choose the textbooks used by our children in school. To become involved in this, the school district can refer us to the curriculum adoption committee, which screens textbooks for gender and race bias.

To Parents:

* "Take things into your own hands. If what the school is offering isn't enough, you have to supplement, whether with tutoring, other classes or doing it yourself."

* "One of the best ways to find out about things is to volunteer in the school."

* "Teachers need positive feedback from parents, as well as problems. It makes a difference in their lives and in the child's life."

—Cecilia Nibeck, Anchorage, parent of two children who have graduated from high school

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* "Seventy-five percent of success in school is self-concept."

* "Don't be afraid to request a teacher."

* "Don't hesitate to contact the principal. Don't wait until it's a crisis--go in when it's a concern."

* "Read your school newsletter, drop by, pick up your kids at the door occasionally."

—Susan Usher, principal of Northwood School in Anchorage

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* "Having communication with the school is very important: visiting the child's classroom and taking time to talk with the child about what's happening, and meeting with the school."

* "It's important not to be put off by school personnel as professionals, to realize they're just people."

* "Be aware of your rights and your child's rights."

* "There are ways parents should demonstrate that education is important. Set a schedule for TV, a schedule for homework. Have books and value reading in the home. Even if the parent is a non-reader, books are very important."

—Jane Atuk, Director of Child Development, RurALCAP

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* "The school system is by and large insular. One thing to do is not make them feel antagonistic."

* "You have to be a visible responder—immediately concerned and cooperative with the school district, even if you feel they're wrong."

* "They have control of your children. Part of what they think about your children is what they think about you. Convince the system that they have a sympathetic adult, willing to work as a team."

—Pat Kennedy, attorney, former teacher and foster parent

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* "Make noise. Get involved. If you can, spend time in the classroom and help."

—Helen Chase, parent of gifted third-grader at Turnagain School in Anchorage

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* "Go in with the attitude that you know your rights. You're either going to get thumped on or you get more cooperation. The first time I went in, I carried a copy of Public Law 94-142. I think they realized I knew what I was talking about."

—Susan Davis, parent of a mentally disabled fourth-grader at Aurora Elementary School in Anchorage

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* "Parents have to realize that all education is trial and error. They have to really work with teachers and the school district."

—Stacy Gillette, Advocacy Services of Alaska

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* "Parents had better wake up and know that they hold the key to their child's future. Even if a parent doesn't have an education, he or she can get involved and make a difference."

* "Parents don't realize how much power they have. They should exercise that power."

* "Parents don't need to go to school just when their kid's in trouble. Once a week is not too often. Or send self-addressed stamped envelopes and tell the teacher, `Please let me know

where Johnny is.' "

* "Those parents who are known at school, their children seem to fare better."

—Joy Green-Armstrong, parent and former member of the Minority Education Concerns Committee, Anchorage School Board

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* "Remember, if you don't advocate for your children, no one will."

* "When you truly believe something is wrong or needs a change, stand by it. Trust your intuition. You know your children. You know their limits, what their bottom-line needs are."

* "No matter what grade level, make sure that you immediately meet the teachers. Let them know you are involved."

—Caren Robinson, legislative aide to Rep. Bettye Davis

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* "Parents are their children's first teachers. They know their children better than we do. They have a responsibility to get to know the teacher and to communicate throughout the year."

* "Get involved in the legal process. Keep an eye on those bills that come out on education. Come to board meetings and make your views known to the board."

—Loretta Poole, Community Relations Supervisor, Anchorage School District

To Teachers, Counselors and Administrators:

* "The teacher has the responsibility to communicate with the parent, too."

—Joy Green-Armstrong, parent and former member of the Minority Education Concerns Committee, Anchorage School Board

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* "Just forget about your title and forget about your position and just be a human being and respond."

—Rebecca Napoleon, tutor-counselor, East High School, Anchorage

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* "We have to make the parents feel more welcome in the schools, get them involved, not just running Xeroxes, but reshaping curriculum."

—Loretta Poole, Community Relations, Anchorage School District

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* "Every child is unique and different, and teachers need to be creative."

—Stacy Gillette, Advocacy Services of Alaska

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* "I think parent involvement needs to be recognized as very important in the education process. It doesn't just happen in parent-teacher conferences. Especially in rural Alaska, it happens in the store and on the street."

—Jane Atuk, Director of Child Development, RurALCAP

The Ladder of Participation

Sometimes, despite our best efforts to work within a system, communication becomes deadlocked and desired changes do not occur. Useful to many parents is the "Ladder of Participation" developed by Sherry Arnstein, a national expert in community participation with government agencies. This communication chart may be especially helpful to those of us who live in rural Alaska and seek more positive interaction between community and school.

LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

Complete Control
Delegated Power
Partnership
Placation
Consultation
Informing
Therapy
Manipulation

Manipulation and **therapy** describe types of **non-participation**. **Manipulation** can occur when a bureaucracy rubber-stamps a plan or idea worked out by someone else. When public relations is mentioned as an objective, **manipulation** may be occurring.

Therapy refers to time and money spent by an organization to educate people about the way it works, instead of responding to the needs of the people it serves. An example of **therapy** is when Alaska Native people criticize a school for its lack of responsiveness to the community and administrators counter with, "You just don't know how education works. You have to learn to work within the system."

Informing, consultation and **placation** are forms of **tokenism**. **Informing** describes a one-way flow of communication, coming from decision-makers to the people who will be affected by the decisions. Often **informing** happens when it's too late for those affected by the decisions to influence the policy makers.

When decision-makers solicit the ideas and opinions of people, but then do not follow through, an empty ritual of **consultation** is occurring. **Consultation** that has no impact may happen when administrators perceive people have no power to change the system.

Sometimes administrators allow people to advise but give them no power in decision-making. When that happens, **placation** is occurring.

Real **citizen power** begins when **partnership** leads to **delegated power** and eventually **citizen control**. **Partnership** describes negotiation and trade-offs between institutions and the people they serve.

Delegated power happens when citizens attain decision-making positions.

Citizen control describes full control by people of a community.

Although the ladder of participation simplifies what actually occurs between citizens and institutions, it is helpful in explaining gradations of power.

For example, if we are concerned about a culturally relevant curriculum in our children's school, we may have to challenge a rubber-stamped curriculum plan and persist through administrators' attempts to educate us about their system.

We may decide to organize with a group of other parents. If at first we are merely informed of decisions, we may need to seek positions that go beyond tokenism and involve delegated power.

Initially, we could circulate petitions, form independent task forces or appear as a group before the school board. If enough parents become actively involved, we can begin to achieve citizen control of our children's education.

RESOURCE GUIDE

Advocacy Services of Alaska 800 478-1234
Designated by the governor as the protection and advocacy agency for people with developmental disabilities in Alaska.

Advocates for Victims of Violence 835-2980
Valdez Crisis Line 835-2999

Alaska Black Caucus 272-5951
Anchorage

Alaska Children's Services 346-2101
Anchorage

Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol & Drug Abuse 349-6602
Anchorage

Alaska Federation of Natives 274-3611
Anchorage

Alaska Foster Parent Association 745-2171
Palmer

Alaska Native Education Council 272-3399
Anchorage

Alaska Native Health Center 225-4156
Ketchikan

Alaska Treatment Center 261-3050
Anchorage

Alaska Youth and Parent Foundation 274-6541
Anchorage agency that advocates and fosters safety and well-being of youth at risk. Provides legal information and education, crisis counseling and referral.

Alaskans for Drug-Free Youth 247-2273
Ketchikan

Anchorage Alliance for the Mentally Ill 333-6862
An agency that offers group and individual support,research and advocacy in education and legislation. 279-3006

Anchorage Education Association 274-0536

Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association 276-2700
An Anchorage-based office offers a variety of counseling programs throughout the Aleutian / Pribilof region.

Bering Straits Native Corporation 443-5252
Nome

Bethel Community Services 543-2840

Bethel Group Home 543-2846

Big Brothers/Big Sisters
Anchorage 278-2621
Juneau 586-3350

Booth Memorial Home 279-0522
An Anchorage home that helps pregnant teens.

Boys Town National Hotline 800 448-3000
This organization helps children and parents in trouble.

Bristol Bay Native Association 842-5257
Dillingham

Challenge Alaska 563-2658
Anchorage agency that offers fitness classes and recreational programs, including downhill skiing, fishing and kayaking for people with disabilities.

Childcare Connection 279-5024
Anchorage non-profit child care referral and information program which provides training for businesses and individuals.

Child Abuse Information and Referral 456-2866
Fairbanks

Children's Community Center 586-6764
Juneau

Children's Receiving Home 852-7007
Barrow

Chugiak Children's Services 688-2660

Clare House 563-4545
An Anchorage emergency shelter for homeless women and women with children. Support, counseling and referral is also offered.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council Parenting Workshop 272-7529
A parenting workshop for Anchorage-area Native families.

Covenant House 272-1255
An Anchorage crisis shelter for youths ages 13 to 20.

Craig Youth Center 826-3243

Division of Family and Youth Services (DFYS) 800 478-4444
Child abuse/neglect reporting hotline.

Fairbanks Headstart 452-4267

Fairbanks Native Association 452-1648

Fairbanks Resource Center for Parents and Children 456-2866

Fairbanks Youth Facility 452-1581

Federation of Community Schools 277-1977
Anchorage

Governor's Council for Gifted and Handicapped 474-2440
Fairbanks

Healthy Baby Hotline 800 478-2221
Sponsored by the Alaska Healthy Baby Project, a confidential information hotline that helps low-income women obtain medical help.

Homer Children's Services 235-6044

Hoonah Indian Association 945-3600

Immigration and Naturalization Literacy Hotline 800 228-8813
Provides information and referrals to local literacy programs.

Immunization Clinics
Call your local public health clinic for information about immunizations for children.

Job Corps 800 478-0531
A federally funded program that offers free vocational training for youths 16 to 21 who meet income guidelines.

Johnson Youth Facility 586-9433
Juneau

Juneau Youth Services 789-7610

Kawerak Head Start 443-2503
Nome

Ketchikan Indian Corporation Social Services 225-5158

Ketchikan Youth Services 225-2540

Kodiak Area Native Association 486-5726

Kodiak Council on Alcoholism 486-3535

Kodiak Island Mental Health Center 486-5742

Kuskokwim Native Association 675-4384
Aniak

LADDER (Learning and Attention-Deficit Disorder Educational Resource) 345-0686
An advocacy group providing education and information on children with learning and attention-deficit disorders. Contact Mary Evans.

Mat-Su Community Counseling Center 376-2411

Mat-Su Services for Children and Adults 376-9270

Metlakatla Head Start 886-5151

National Federation of the Blind 800 638-7518
A federally funded program that offers scholarships for blind people and employment referral services for employers and blind people seeking work.

Nineline 800 999-9999
A hotline for youth experiencing problems, operated by the Covenant House in Anchorage.

Nome Community Center 443-5259

Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
Consult your school for your local PTA.

Petersburg Children's Center 772-3419

Petersburg Council on Alcoholism 772-3552

Petersburg Youth Program 772-4422

Project Connect Youth Employment Counseling Service 274-6541
Available through the Job Training Partnership Act and Alaska Youth and Parent Foundation.

Project TEACH 456-4003
A Fairbanks-area infant-learning program for developmentally-delayed children up to age 3.

Roger Lang Clearinghouse for Circumpolar Education 443-5668
A clearinghouse for elementary and secondary level programs that provide culturally relevant curriculum, instructional materials and training for Alaska Native teachers and students.

RurAL CAP 800 478-7277
A private, non-profit corporation whose goal is to promote maximum participation by village people in the elimination of the causes and conditions of poverty in rural Alaska. RurAL CAP administers comprehensive child development programs which include components in nutrition, health, education, special needs, parental involvement, career development, training and advocacy.

Sitka Community Association 747-3207

Sitka Teen Resource Center 747-3500

Sitkans Against Family Violence 747-3370

Southwestern Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse 543-3994
Bethel

Special Education Parent Resource Center 274-4582
Located in the Helen S. Whaley in Anchorage, this resource center helps parents of emotionally-disturbed and physically-disabled children. ext. 212

Tanana Chiefs Conference 452-8251

Tok Area Mental Health Program 883-5106

Unalaskans Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence 581-1500

Valdez Counseling Center 835-2838

Well Child Clinics
Check with your local public health clinic for information on well child clinics, which provide services such as immunizations, height/weight checks, health screening, and education on nutrition, safety, and physical, social and emotional development.

WIC—Women, Infants , Children
Federal nutrition program

Winter Allergies Hotline 800 727-5400

Wrangell Council on Alcoholism 874-3338

Youth Advocate Project 945-3230
Hoonah

Youth and Parent Foundation 24-Hour Crisis Line 274-6541
An Anchorage hotline for troubled youth, parents and runaways. 563-7233

Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation 543-3321
Bethel